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ABSTRACT

This study compared the attitudes of minority students with learning disabilities and their parents to both student-centered homework and teacher-directed homework assignments. An adapted alternating treatments design was used to compare the return rates between traditional teacher-directed homework and student-centered assignments with 40 students identified with learning disabilities. The students attended a high school in Los Angeles (California) with an enrollment of 87 percent African American and 10 percent Hispanic students. The study found that student-centered homework return rates were an average of 7 percent higher than teacher-directed homework return rates. Students with low (less than 25 percent) baseline teacher-directed homework return rates increased their return rates by an average of 13 percent under the student-centered condition. Also, 86 percent of students reported they preferred the non-traditional student-centered assignments. Qualitative analysis from parent interviews indicated that parents had mixed feelings on homework type preference. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

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Comparing the Effects of Teacher-Directed Homework and Student-Centered Homework on Return Rate and Homework Attitudes of Minority Learning Disabled Students

Roundtable Paper Presentation for the 1997 AERA Convention
Chicago

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Objectives

The issue of the home-community connection with our schools has received major attention within the field of education, with out-of-school learning seen as especially important and valuable to the process of learning. One traditional area within the home-school connection is homework. Yet, most current homework research in special education has been based on a traditional, reductionistic perspective in defining, assessing, and instructing those students identified with learning disabilities (Poplin, 1998), thereby viewing homework as practice, preparation, and extension of classroom skills assigned by teachers (Lee & Pruitt, 1979).

Concern is especially strong with students identified as learning disabled, as dropout and unemployment rates tend to generally be higher for them than for other students, with academic underachievement being the most common characteristic. In particular, Ogbu (1987) points out that "a disproportionate number of minority children are channeled into special education..." (p. 319). Furthermore, students with learning disabilities tend to experience more homework problems, especially in areas of motivation and distractibility (Polloway, Foley & Epstein, 1992).

In response to concerns issued by researchers (e.g., Bursuck, 1994; Mercer & Mercer, 1993; Polloway et al., 1992; Salend & Schliff, 1989), the following hypotheses for this study were proposed: 1) Student-centered homework assignments will increase return rates of these students, when provided with alternative types of assignments. 2) In particular, those students having a high baseline return rate with teacher-directed homework as well as those having a low baseline return rate with teacher-directed homework will increase return rate student-centered homework, as compared to teacher-directed homework. 3) Participating students will prefer student-centered homework assignments, when provided with alternative types of assignments. 4) Parents' homework type preference will be related to their own experiences as well as reflecting their children's homework attitudes.

Perspectives

Although there is a significant amount of literature on homework, much is dominated by a traditional model of learning which focuses on use of homework for practice, repetition and extension of teacher-initiated and directed classroom goals. In the particular area of special education with learning disabled students, most homework studies have assumed a teacher-directed orientation toward homework. Traditional homework assignments are commonly represented by activities that reflect teacher/textbook goals, oftentimes expressed in formalized

pre-written lesson plans. Examples include answering end-of-chapter textbook questions, writing definitions to teacher chosen vocabulary words, or completing worksheets not finished in class.

More recently, the influence of a social constructivist perspective is being felt in teaching and learning, especially in the area of literacy. Briefly, this perspective emphasizes that learning develops from interaction with others, with meaning being a social creation (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, in order for learning experiences to be motivating, the learner's interaction with the real world needs to be incorporated. Rueda and Moll (1994) point out that children appear more motivated to learn when conditions are authentic, meaningful, jointly constructed with peers/teachers, and are within their reach. From a current constructivist perspective, then, homework would be student-centered rather than teacher-directed. These particular assignments would be initiated by the students and/or jointly constructed with peers and/or the teacher. Student-centered homework would be more apt to reflect the student's home/community world in a realistic and meaningful way. From a social constructivist theory, this type of homework would also provide a more natural challenge for the student while also encouraging support and assistance from more capable others in and out of the classroom. Examples would include writing authentic letters, writing on personally chosen topics, completing an art project of personal interest.

Methods

An adapted alternating treatments design (Barlow & Hayes, 1979) was used in the first part of this study to compare the return rates between traditional teacher-directed homework assignments and student-centered homework assignments. Alternating treatment designs are useful when comparing two treatments that use a single subject or single group as its own control in a study. Teacher-directed homework reflected assignments typically offered to students with learning disabilities, mirroring traditional theoretical frameworks, such as a behaviorist perspective. Examples included teacher-chosen vocabulary to define, ready-made worksheets to complete, and teacher-initiated essay prompts to write from. Student-centered homework reflected assignments created by students with or without adult support, representing authentic-meaningful activities and affording opportunity for home assistance and involvement. This non-traditional type of homework mirrored a contemporary social constructivist framework, emphasizing that learning develops from interaction with others. Examples from this study included journal, letter, and story formats on personal topics such as sports, family personal plans, television shows, and video games.

Descriptive research (Isaac & Michael, 1990) was used in the second part of the study, to examine student homework type preference, student general homework attitude, parent homework type preference, and parent general homework attitude. The purpose of descriptive research is to accurately depict facts and characteristics of a given group of participants or area of interest.

Following a 4-week baseline period of assigning only teacher-directed homework, participating students were randomly assigned teacher-directed or student-centered homework for 12 weeks. Students then completed homework surveys and writing prompts, followed by four student interviews and four parent interviews, each of which were randomly chosen.

Data Sources

Forty students identified with learning disabilities participated in the study while attending a large public high school in the metropolitan Los Angeles area. 87% of the student participants were African American, with 10% being Hispanic and 3% Caucasian. 90% of the student participants cited English as their home language, with the remaining 10% citing Spanish as their home language. Males comprised 70% of the student sample. 87% of the student

sample was enrolled in special education classes for most of the school day and the remainder enrolled in special education classes on a part-time schedule (resource). All participating students attended one of five departmental special education English classes taught by one of the authors. In addition, four randomly chosen parents of the student participants participated in the last part of the study.

Results/Conclusions

Overall descriptive results found that student-centered homework return rates of all forty participating students increased by an average of 7% as compared to teacher-directed homework return rates, which decreased by an average of 7%. See Figure 1 for homework return rate means for overall combined group. Those 19 students with high baseline return rates of 25% or more increased student-centered homework return rates by an average of 1% while decreasing teacher-directed homework return rates by an average of 16%. Those 21 students with low baseline return rates of less than 25% increased student-centered homework return rates by an average of 13% while increasing teacher-directed homework return rates by less than an average of 1%. See Figure 2 for homework return rate means for high baseline return group and low baseline return group.

Results from student homework surveys found that most participating students (86%) preferred non-traditional student-centered homework assignments over traditional teacher-directed homework assignments. Students' homework attitudes were qualitatively analyzed from surveys, writing prompts, and interviews and were found to be related to factors such as: enjoyment level, understanding, empowerment, helpfulness, and value orientation. Qualitative results from the parent interviews indicated that parents had mixed feelings on homework type preference, reflecting homework attitude factors similar to their children's attitudes, as well as unique, parent homework attitude factors such as: interests of child, independence, amount of homework, home/school involvement, and home-school communication.

Educational/Scientific Importance

Combined results argue in favor of the following: closer examination and implementation of social constructivist educational opportunities for urban, secondary level, minority students with learning disabilities; further exploration of alternative teaching approaches with this particular population of students; and encouragement in assisting these students to actively create authentic, student-initiated learning opportunities, thereby encouraging and strengthening the home-school connection.

In particular, this study provided opportunity to reconsider how homework is conceptualized for those students identified as learning disabled who seldom return homework assignments. Providing opportunity for these students to create their own homework assignments (which are authentic, meaningful, and allow for assistance) may be a vehicle to extend their school learning. In addition, student-centered homework assignments may also provide opportunity for these students to decrease their homework problems, thereby increasing motivation with school related experiences while decreasing distractibility problems. Results of this study may also extend the existing knowledge on family homework type preferences and general homework attitudes of these students thereby providing more opportunity to explore alternative way to increase home-school involvement in the learning process.

And finally, this study may signify further opportunity for researchers and educators to consider alternative, social interaction learning perspectives with those students identified as learning disabled as well as opportunity to personally reflect on their own beliefs of learning and their assumptions on instruction.

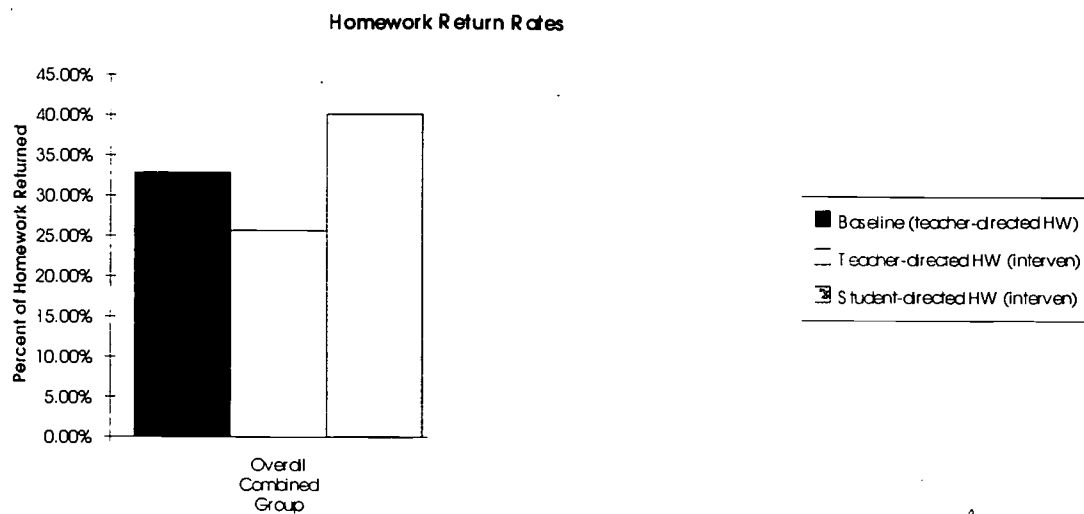


Fig. 1. Homework return rate means for overall combined group.

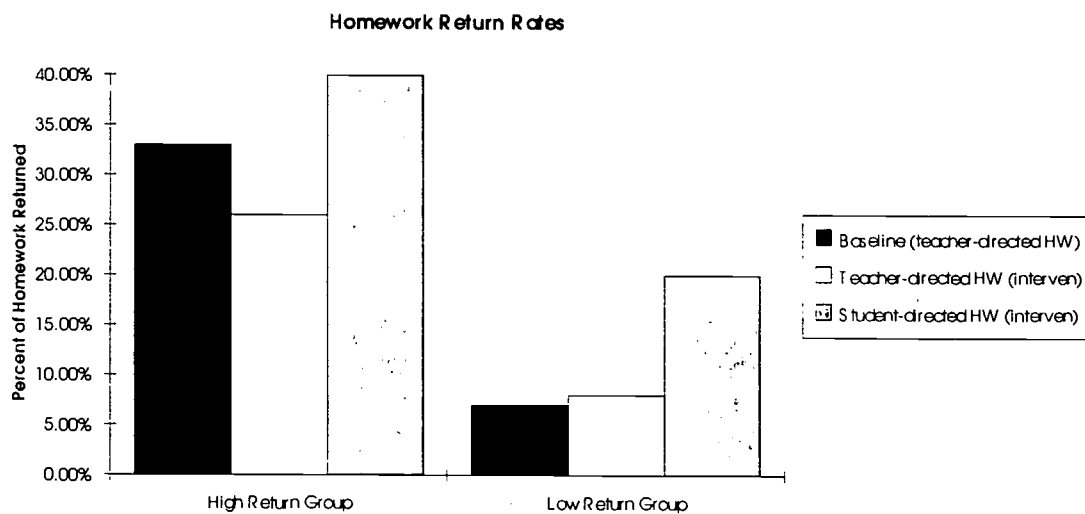


Fig. 2. Homework return rate means for high baseline return group and low baseline return group.

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